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SIoux FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA

The “Phillips to the Falls” Project

Brownfields revitalization came to play an essential role in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, as the city’s population began to grow and expand from 70,000 to nearly 130,000 over the last three decades. Much of the growth to support the increase in population has been in previously undeveloped greenfields causing new industrial parks and shopping malls to appear at the fringes of city limits. This pattern pulled businesses and commercial activity away from a downtown Sioux Falls that was already in economic and physical decline. The situation left the city’s namesake and birthplace—a 300 foot waterfall on the Big Sioux River—surrounded by a large and underutilized industrial corridor that included junkyards, a brick warehouse, and railroad tracks. The blighted river parcels detracted from what had once been an important source of civic pride – the Falls.

Reclaiming the Falls

Made possible in part by an EPA Assessment Demonstration Pilot awarded to Sioux Falls in 1996, the progress on the “Phillips to the Falls” project is accelerating and EPA, through its Brownfields Program funding, is helping the city complete the last, critical piece of the puzzle – reconnecting the north part of downtown with Falls Park and the River. Already underway, the final plans include the redevelopment of a remaining large salvage yard into a new park, expanding and improving Falls Park, and extending nearby streets to link the parks with downtown. Plans also include developing offices, hotels, apartment buildings, retail shops, restaurants, historic sites, and restaurants near the area.



Aerial View of the Project

Over the past few decades, however, the city has undertaken extensive steps to clean up and revive the downtown area through its “Phillips (Avenue) to the Falls” project. From the beginning, the city realized that areas along the Big Sioux and the Falls would be critical to the revitalization of downtown businesses. After some early success with urban renewal projects, public investments, development incentives, and the establishment of a River Greenway, the city initiated what would become a multi-million dollar investment in restoring Falls Park in 1991.

Restoring areas along the River and the Falls has gone a long way towards bringing visitors and businesses back into the downtown area. Today, a viewing tower provides visitors with a breathtaking view of the Falls and the city, while an old-fashioned trolley transports people along the river to Falls Park. As Don Seten of the City Planning Office explains, “Efforts to revitalize downtown have been going on for years, but they have really taken off since Falls Park was restored. Now when people think about our city, they think of the Park and the magnificent sight of the Sioux Falls rushing through the center of our downtown area.”

The next big step is taking care of the environmental concerns on the last few blighted properties. Don Seten explains that while Sioux Falls has come a long way, EPA is helping the city put the icing on the cake. “After all the work we had done, it became clear that north downtown still needed a jump start.

The blighted junkyard, rail switching yards and brickyard properties were separating two beautiful and economically vital areas and hampering reinvestment in the north downtown area. With EPA's help we are turning the industrial corridor that separated these areas into a beautiful park and providing direct street access all the way to the Falls."

Assessments and Accomplishments

Through the EPA Brownfields Assessment Grant, the city has been able to assess background historical uses of these brownfields properties, collect past investigation reports, and collaborate in the preparation of a plan for the redevelopment of the area. The city has conducted an environmental site assessment of soils and groundwater in the former industrial corridor. The results of the assessment have given way to the development and implementation of a risk-based remediation plan to target the lead contamination in the soil, a plan that Sioux Falls hopes to have completed in the next year.



Targeted Area of the Sioux Falls Assessment Pilot



Falls Park Offers Picturesque Views of the Big Sioux River

Recently, the City of Sioux Falls has also made a series of other accomplishments. The city was able to acquire both the junkyard and the brick wholesale yard on the property, and settled on an agreement with the rail line that ran through the property. The junk yard and brick wholesale company structures have been demolished and debris has been cleared along with dense undergrowth by the water, making for a more attractive walk to the waterfront. The city is also finalizing its street scape design plan, remediation plan, and land reuse plan.

As the park acquisition and brownfields project continues, there are signs that the renaissance that the city hopes for is already underway. Jeff Hazard, a local architect, works at the once abandoned Phillips Center, a historic warehouse building that his firm restored. The building is now home to law and architecture firms, a brew pub, and a night club. When asked about what the area was like a few years ago, Jeff explains: "If there was a part of Sioux Falls you didn't go to this was it. But things are really improving. Our firm is now thriving on renovating old structures downtown for new businesses. More tourists are coming, and once the new park and street scape are completed, the reconnecting of downtown with the Falls will become a major draw for even more activity." A second historic warehouse has been redeveloped into residential flats above retail and office space along the boundary of the targeted brownfields property. The flats have been widely popular and are filled as soon as one becomes available.

Sioux Falls looks to the future and is very excited about what is to come. There has been an increase in tourism and interest in the Falls Park and the downtown area since revitalization began in the 1990s, and once the Phillips to the Falls project is complete and fully opened to the public the local community will fully experience the benefits of its hard work.

For more information regarding the Sioux Falls Assessment Pilot please contact Mr. Don Seten at (605) 367-8895. For more information regarding Brownfields in Region 8, please contact Kathie Atencio at (303) 312-6803.